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# Ways of Presenting Love in Ancient Sanskrit Literature

## Abstract

This study traces the appearance and relevance of love motifs in Sanskrit texts. It deals with preclassical, classical and medieval literature, with excerpts from the Vedic scriptures, the epics, the normative texts and the courtly formalized Kāvya. Attention is paid to the change in the status of women, whose position becomes gradually more subordinate over time. Several conventional *topoi* of Sanskrit erotic literature are examined, such as love enjoyed in the union of the lovers, or suffered in their separation; divine love; the traditional belief that women are more passionate than men; the different religious/philosophical schools' outlook towards love; love in the dramatic theory of aesthetic experience; the importance of marriage, and marital love as opposed or complementary to illicit love. Finally there is a brief survey of a few scientific disciplines that have something to say about the experience of love, like Āyurveda, astronomy/astrology, and the treatises on Dharma and those on the science of government.

1. For examples of divine loves, see for instance Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord*; Dehejia, *Antal*; and Lynch.

2. All translations, if not otherwise specified, are my own.

Most Sanskrit literary genres feature love stories, set in all sorts of social contexts. The earliest examples are found in the first known texts, the Vedas, where both gods and humans are often portrayed falling in love.<sup>1</sup> These early images of a loving relationship, like that between the human king Purūravas and the heavenly nymph Urvaśī, for instance, address sexual issues in a very direct manner. The expressions of love become far more guarded in the subsequent literature, where people's attitudes seem to become more and more conventional and prudish. This gradual change takes place first in parts of the Epics, and then in Kāvya, the conventional court literature, with the notable exception of satirical writings.

The oldest myths, from the Vedas on, recount in poetry the love of gods and humans. Remarkably, one of the oldest mentions of Kāma as Desire, found in a puzzling cosmogonic poem of the *Ṛgveda*, speaks of it as “the first seed of mind” (10.129).<sup>2</sup> That nothing could ever be started nor accomplished without the initial impulse of desire is already taken here as a matter of fact. In many vedic verses, moreover, love is seen to cast a powerful spell, capable of impris-

3. It is the lament of sage Agastya who blames his wife Lopāmudrā. For a modern study, see Thieme.

4. Story of Purūravas and Urvaśi: *Rgveda* 10.95.

5. “Verses on Kāma (‘Desire’)” of the third century CE, which alludes to earlier texts now lost.

oning the beloved’s soul, and amorous stanzas are songs of both longing and regret. There is for instance the dirge of an ascetic husband, uniquely devoted to sacrifice, when his wife of many years, exhausted from constant renunciation of love, finally manages to seduce him and “lead him astray” (*Rgveda* 1.179),<sup>3</sup> and the even more poignant lament of the kingly hero Purūravas, who is absolutely distraught when his heavenly companion leaves him through no fault of his own.<sup>4</sup>

Vedic love poetry on the whole shows a rather sanguine state of affairs, where erotic scenes are shown openly, and women often take the initiative. The later *Atharvaveda* collection, for instance, teaches magic formulas to enrapture the mind of one’s beloved; these incantations are employed sometimes by men, sometimes by women, with spells to ward off rivals. As in the medical texts, belonging to a later period, *Atharvaveda* also gives recipes for enhancing men’s virility. Love and sexuality here are strongly bound together, so that they seem almost synonymous.

Looking at later texts, it seems that no singular theory on love as a complex set of feelings was proposed by ancient Indian thinkers. There were many different points of view, expressed in a multiplicity of stories, and each revealed a different ethical approach. This made for an extreme variety of themes as well as of attitudes towards the love experience. India possesses rather early love manuals – the best known of which is the *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsyāyana<sup>5</sup> – that deal in an exemplary manner with sexuality, and, though with minor emphasis, with the psychology of lovers. These texts proposed a view of relative equality between the genders, as love was meant to be fulfilled in mutual embrace. A singular trait of ancient Indian literature that is continued in later writings, particularly of religious people, is the belief that women as lovers are more passionate than men. The *Mahābhārata* in 12.34.33 states: “The race of womankind is the seat of lust.” This sounds like a disparaging comment, while on the contrary in Kāvya enamoured women are depicted as very courageous and daring heroines. Several poems in fact revolve around the trope of the *abhisārikā*, the woman in love who, braving her fear of darkness and the dangers of the unknown, on a moonless night sets out alone for a furtive rendez-vous with her beloved. Love in marriage is often contrasted with illicit love; the latter in Kāvya is often looked upon favourably because of its spontaneous nature.

The *Kāmasūtra*, not a normative text on social *mores*, though an important influence on all subsequent Indian writers of love stories,

is very open in speaking of mutual sexual fulfillment, and strongly promotes marriage. *Kāmasūtra* does not concentrate exclusively on the sexual aspects of the love experience, but rather gives a measure of consideration to the psychological states of mind of the two people in the couple. It subtly describes, for instance, the anxious feelings of a newly wedded virgin, whom most types of Indian literature usually presented as a complete *ingénue*, and suggests the gentle means by which her husband should try to first reassure, and then win over and seduce her.

In the normative texts on *dharma*, and in society, in fact, a woman was taken seriously only as a wife and a mother.<sup>6</sup> Marriage was the only *saṁskāra*, “perfecting rite,” or rite of passage, performed for a living woman. The different stages of this ritual and even its symbolic movements within the nuptial pavilion highlighted the greater importance given to the bridegroom. In families of high social classes, whatever their religious propensities, marriages arranged from infancy were the norm. These did not presuppose any initial feelings of love between the two young people involved, who usually had never even set eyes on each other before marriage. This type of social contract, while giving greater importance to the family of the bridegroom, could turn the young bride into a commodity almost ‘owned’ by the husband’s family, even though she had not actually been bought by bride price, but rather brought to the receiving family a usually conspicuous dowry. Worse still, such an early marriage<sup>7</sup> could also result in child widows, or very young widows. Such widows’ position was different in different times: in some cases, for instance in the Epics, widows could (or were obliged to) remarry<sup>8</sup> for the sake of begetting children, but in later times, on the contrary, they were supposed to lead a life of restraint and privation, and could not obtain another husband.<sup>9</sup> The epic situation was particular, because in aristocratic families, for a dynasty’s sake, it was of the utmost importance that couples produce heirs.<sup>10</sup> One could think that to be accepted in these extremely affluent families might have represented a great fortune for a woman; often, however, in kingly retinues a particular wife or concubine was briefly chosen as the favourite, and equally quickly forgotten, by a lord to whom everything was allowed and due, until he eventually died on the battlefield. At that time his women might have had to follow him on the funeral pyre, or become the slaves of the winner. While much honour was attributed to the former ‘choice’<sup>11</sup> of following the husband even in death, a practice called *samanāgamana*, or *samaragamana*, the royal women who did

6. Barring of course the rare exceptions of female ascetics and recluses belonging to different religious groups.

7. *Mahābhārata* reports different ages for a bride: 13.44.13 maintains that a thirty-year-old man should marry a girl of ten, and a man of twenty-one a girl of seven. *Mahābhārata* 13.44.15 however says that a girl should marry in the fourth year after puberty.

8. This is what happened to Ambikā and Ambālikā early in *Mahābhārata*. They were however the property of their husband’s family, and in fact were obliged, by their mother-in-law, to remarry a terrifyingly looking, smelly ascetic (1.7.99.40).

9. Often widows were considered responsible for their husbands’ death, or just deemed inauspicious.

10. And a male heir at that.

11. The courageous, proud declarations of epic Śakuntalā about the wife as a real *pativrātā*, “a woman whose vow is her husband,” in *Śakuntalopākhyāna* is the first allusion in *Mahābhārata* to this extreme case of wifely fidelity (1.74).

12. Compare the recent study of Pisano, who speaks of it as a pre-Rgvedic custom (233 and note 22). Pisano mentions that this usage is also found among “many ancient Indo-European-speaking [sic] peoples, such as the Greeks, Thracians, Scythians, Germans and Slavs,” where co-wives contended with each other for the right to die with their husband “and the selected one was slain by her closest relatives.”

13. The female present participle of the verbal base *as*, “to be;” its first meaning is “true woman,” *i.e.* “virtuous and devoted woman.” Then, in memory of mythical *Satī*, it came to refer to the faithful widow who ascended her husband’s pyre on his death.

14. Lord Bentick imposed the ban on the practice in that year on all the territories controlled by the British, and it was reiterated, for the whole of India, by the independent Indian Republic in 1947 (see Moneta 112).

15. About the self-sacrifice of widows in Kalhāṇa’s *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, see Baldissera, “Traditions of protest.” For a late Sanskrit text on the rules to be followed by devoted wives in Hindu society, see Tryambakayajvan’s *Stridharma-paddhati* (Leslie).

16. *Sītā* remained unscathed and was found and proclaimed unrepachable by *Agni* (*Rāmāyaṇa* 6.106.4).

17. This is especially true of the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (“Manu’s Code of Law”), whereas the *Arthasāstra* attributed to Kauṭilya, of earlier composition, had a more open approach. In the *Arthasāstra* women were entitled to their own properties, even as wives, and their own rights appear well established; for instance (3.4.24, 3.4.31–36) the wife of a man who had gone abroad for over a year without sending her news of his whereabouts was allowed to remarry – she would have to wait for another year if she had already given birth to his children.

not chose to burn themselves, or who managed to avoid this prestigious end, were blamed for their lack of courage and faithfulness (on this custom see also Datta; Fisch; and Moneta). The practice of first burying, and later burning, together with a hero’s body, all the possessions belonging to the dead warrior, including his horses, dogs, wives, favourites and retainers, seems to have come to India from ancient Central Asia. It seems to have already been considered the remnant of an ancient custom in Vedic literature,<sup>12</sup> but later, starting with the Epics, it was resumed in warrior families. In some places, especially in North India, it continued for a very long time. The most recent best-known (but by no means isolated) example of a so-called *satī*<sup>13</sup> is that of Roop Kanwar, a Rajasthani wife, who allegedly burnt herself on her husband’s body in 1987 (Oldenburg; Nandy), when the practice had already been banned in the whole of British India since 1829.<sup>14</sup>

Some male contrary voices were heard quite early, like that of the great writer Bāṇa, who flourished in Kanauj at the court of king Harṣa (reigned 606–47). In his novel *Kādambarī*, Bāṇa wrote that the custom of widow burning was both inhuman and stupid. *Kādambarī* is extremely original also in having two young men die for love, whereas its female heroines, though saddened by their lovers’ demise, managed to survive.

On the other hand, even comparatively late historians such as Kalhāṇa, in twelfth century Kashmir, and several other writers up to the nineteenth century, upheld the view that a *satī* was the true example of a supremely devoted wife.<sup>15</sup> Burning by fire was considered the ultimate purification, and *Agni*, the fire god, might be called upon also to witness a woman’s purity, as in the voluntary ordeal of princess *Sītā*<sup>16</sup> in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

At about the same period of the *Kāmasūtra*, the rules of most normative texts that tried to regulate ancient Indian social intercourse, in fact, were very strict, especially as regarded the position of women.<sup>17</sup> There was a vast gap between the *Kāmasūtra*’s equally shared view of pleasure, which was then followed in the amorous idylls portrayed in the literary texts of *Kāvya* or in the masterpieces of the visual arts, and the actual reality that one could perceive, as in filigree, under these ideal embellishments (see Kakar, *Intimate relations*).

This state of affairs induces one to think that ancient love literature in poetry and prose, such as *Kāvya*, which showed other possible adventures of body and soul, where women acted as bold lovers, and were equally loved in return, mirrored a desire of evasion in the

18. On erotic art in Indian temples see Desai, *Erotic Sculpture*; and Desai, *The Religious Imagery*.

19. Those of later love manuals, such as the fifteenth century *Ratimañjarī* (in Bhaṭṭācāryya), were even more daring than the *Kāmasūtra*'s ones.

20. See for instance the considerations of Doniger O'Flaherty in her Introduction.

romantic or religious myth, and spoke to a public willing to believe in the ideal world created by the artists' imagination. This is also what appears to happen in the erotic scenes<sup>18</sup> preserved in many temple sculptures: they show a parallel reality, a singular canon, where male and female complete each other. This was mythically and sculpturally represented by the composite image of the Ardhanaṛīśvara, "The Lord whose half is a woman." At the same time erotic temple art has usually been interpreted as an invitation to, and representation of, fertility, both for the land and for the king, whose first and foremost wife was always the earth, which he had to both protect and render fecund.

Writings about love in India have often constituted the two poles of a pendulum that swings between the extremes of a strong sensuality, and the strictest asceticism. There were the erotic stanzas<sup>19</sup> or sculptures on the one hand, and on the other the strictures of ascetic life, that condemned any loving engagement. Paradoxically, a similar ardour was seen at work in both paths, because the fire of Eros and that of ascetic tension were similarly all-consuming. They were deemed equally excessive,<sup>20</sup> and therefore dangerous for both the predominance of gods over humans, and a harmonious development of social life on earth. It is also interesting to consider that one of the highest forms of penance for ascetics consisted of controlling their seed, in feats of ever more complex concentration, that however were also more subject to distraction.

Marriage performed according to *dharma* could represent a middle way between extreme eroticism and renunciation, by channeling the erotic (or the ascetic) energy into an acceptable form, and embodying a sort of ascetic rule, followed through continence and the mutual devotion of the spouses. But marriage unfortunately in many cases does not seem to have solved the problem in a satisfactory manner for either party. Women of all social walks are still disappointed in their romantic expectations (Kakar and Ross), triggered once upon a time by poems and love ballads, and today by commercial movies in Bollywood style, while several men, from the ancient seers to Gandhi, thought that love, even in marriage, was a hindrance in their spiritual paths.

Marriage however was and is the central pivot of Indian society, and the teachings of the *Kāmasūtra*, aimed to reach the well-to-do young city dwellers, were mostly concerned with creating harmony within the married couple. The fact that many of its chapters are devoted to the sexual act or to foreplay, however, makes for a sustained



21. A comparable situation occurs for instance in the ancient Greek poem *Hero and Leander* (v. 162): see below.

22. This because everything in his territory belonged to the king who ruled it, starting from the land where people established their businesses.

sexual imagery. Starting from the more ancient works, in fact, love in Sanskrit, and generally in Indian texts, is presented through its outward physical manifestations. Even in theatrical practice and in *alanikāraśāstra* (“the science of poetics”), it is the spontaneous, physical reactions to a given emotion that are particularly appreciated, as they cannot be feigned.<sup>21</sup> And the emotion induced by desire/love is recognised as one of the most powerful.

In ancient India love was seen as an important part of life not only in myth and fiction, but also in scientific (astronomical, juridico-political, medical) and religious texts. Astronomy (*jyotiśāstra*) studied and indicated the auspicious times for the nuptials, and determined whether the prospective spouses were reciprocally compatible by interpreting their birth charts as well as the auspicious or inauspicious marks present on their bodies. The most ancient treatise on the science of government, the *Arthaśāstra*, expounded patrimonial and family law, and prescribed also what interest a king should put into the high courtesans’ establishments, and the proportion of the monthly taxes he should then exact from them.<sup>22</sup>

Medical science (*Āyurveda*, “The science about the [length of the] span of life”), when dealing with the means and regimens to increase and preserve health, explained also at what time in the year and how frequently people should engage in physical activities, including love-making. Like the ancient *Atharvaveda*, it offered several medical prescriptions to increase or recover virility. The authors of the first āyurvedic medical texts thought that vigorous sexual activity was one of the practices to be taught and promoted as conducive to a healthy life. Physicians were concerned primarily with the maintenance and/or restoration of health, and considered an intense and ideally satisfactory love life as extremely good for people living in society. According to the medical view, in fact, people had first to be healthy, and only then they could eventually opt to follow a religious calling. These works, starting with the *Cārakasamhitā*, did not only sing the praise of the purely physical side of this subject. Their psychological insight, in fact, made the medical authors write that the best stimulant or aphrodisiac for a man was an exciting young woman, who would be happy to encourage his advances and respond to his desire in an equally enamoured way. A few verses below, one discovers that such a woman would be in fact the best wife one could wish for, and that her qualities would go well beyond a mere sexual entente with her man:

She who, with her excellent qualities, captures all the sense organs of her husband, [so that], when he is without her, he sees the whole world as empty of women, a depressing thing. (*Cāraḱasaṁhitā* 2.11b–12a)

she without whom [her] man feels his body as heavy, as if it were deprived of its sense organs; she looking at whom he is no longer overcome by suffering, anguish, dejection nor fear. (*Cāraḱasaṁhitā* 2.12b–13a)

she who, when approached by him, gives him back his self confidence; she at whose sight he is maddened by joy; she who, though he sees her often, evokes in him an extreme agitation and excitement, as if he were seeing her for the first time... (*Cāraḱasaṁhitā* 2.13b–14a)<sup>23</sup>

23. Agniveśa, in both cited editions.

These verses, though proceeding from physical desire, describe much more than the mere sexual act, and offer a very favourable picture of women as life companions, like in the marvellous defence of the wife as the best friend of man in the speech of spurned Śakuntalā at the court of king Duṣyanta in *Mahābhārata* (1.74).

At the same time, women were considered to be more passionate than men, starting in the Vedic hymns and continuing in the medieval devotional poems revolving around the figures of Śiva or Kṛṣṇa.<sup>24</sup> In these devotional poems, as in the profane ones of Kāvya, it could seem that the only ‘real’ love could be the love freely offered of an adulterous woman, or of a young woman who, refusing the unknown bridegroom proposed by her family, ran instead towards a *gāndharva* marriage with the man of her choice. In the epics, like in *kathā* (“stories”), there are also different possibilities, in that many episodes and stories revolve around very happy marriages. These include that of Sāvitrī in *Mahābhārata*, as well as that of Rāma and Sītā in *Rāmāyaṇa* (that was happy at least until political considerations interrupted abruptly the harmony of their mutual love), or the one of the learned young Brahmin Vararuci and of his extremely intelligent and resourceful wife Upakośā in *Kathāsaritsāgara* (Baldišsera, “The Alluring Ladylove”).

For most ascetic currents, on the other hand, that aspired to reach liberation from both social constraints in this life and rebirth after it, love and sex were the ultimate bane (Baldišsera, “Sinister Fluids”). Their adepts did not want to risk procreating and being subjected to renewed cycles of births and deaths. Not all religious think-

24. For female devotion towards a male god, see Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*; Ramanujan, *Hymns*; Hardy.

ers agreed on this point, in part because most ascetic communities were dependent on a harmoniously married lay society for their livelihood. The writers of an early Upaniṣat and those of several tantric texts, for instance, used either metaphors about love or actual love practices to indicate, or to reach, specific states of heightened awareness. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣat* 4.3.21 reads: “Now as a man, when embraced by a beloved wife, knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within, thus this person, when embraced by the intelligent Self, knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within”.

This recalls closely the already mentioned image of the Ardhanārīśvara, “The Lord whose half is a woman,” where god and goddess are so closely bound together to become almost indistinguishable from each other.

As for tantric ideas, they could be exemplified by a minor tantric text, the *Svabhodayamañjarī* of Vāmanadatta. In the words of Sanderson (277–78), it “teaches a series of mental practices to bring about liberation-in-life through the dissolution of contracted awareness (*manah, cittam*) by means of insight (*niścayaḥ*) into the emptiness of mental and objective phenomena and reversion into the uncontracted inner ground by observing the process of the arising and dying away of cognition, especially where the latter is very intense, as in the perception of the beautiful and meditation on the sensation of orgasm: [...] one should direct one’s attention at the climax of love-making on the point between the penis and the navel. As the bliss of orgasm fades one will suddenly be freed of all perturbation.”<sup>25</sup>

The followers of Tantra were often blamed for their ‘licentious’ conduct by the self-appointed guardians of public morals. These were always careful to preserve not only appearances, but also caste distinctions, that were often blurred in the supposed tantric orgies.

Many (non-tantric) Brahmanical, Jain, and Buddhist religious texts, moreover, promoted an ascetic view that repeatedly warned people of the adverse effects of desire.<sup>26</sup> This was depicted as a yearning almost impossible to quench, dangerous because it would immediately lead to an interruption of the correct execution of one’s religious duties. Even worse, it could also result in violence or in a continuous chain of rebirths, the exact opposite of the ascetic ideal of liberation. In a reverse mirror image to the āyurvedic doctors, some of these authors regarded women as the most repulsive and dangerous species on earth. A stanza from the *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* attributed to the Buddhist sage Nāgārjuna reads: “A mendicant, a lover, and a dog have three different opinions about the same female body: – a

25. *Svabhodayamañjarī* B, f. 5r6–7 (lacking in A), v. 38; in Sanderson 277–78 and note 153.

26. On the Buddhist approach to love, see Faure.



27. *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* attributed to Nāgārjuna, v. 20 (Lindtner 90). It also appears in Vallabhadeva's *Subhāṣitāvali* as nr. 3391 and in Böhlingk as nr. 3976, attributed to Madhava's *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*.

28. For the extreme reactions of young monks, who sometimes committed suicide or necrophilia in the burning ground because of this practice, see Wilson, *passim*. To avoid this problem, the spiritual exercise called *aśubhabhāvanā* ("visualisation on the repugnant") was later forbidden to young monks unaccompanied by a teacher.

29. See "Mettasutta" with the commentary *Paramatthajotikā* by Buddhaghosa in *Suttanipāta-Aṭṭhakathā* 1.193.

corpse, [my] beloved, food."<sup>27</sup> An even worse description is in some later Buddhist scriptures that taught adepts to meditate on the impurities hidden in bodies, and especially in the female body, in order to counteract its allurements.<sup>28</sup> In the words of Candragomin's *Śiṣyalekha* ("Letter to a Disciple") of the fourth century CE, "the bodies of women, far from looking like the *aravinda* lotus, the moon, or the *indīvara* lotus, [like in poets' comparisons] are deformed and emanate a putrid smell" (v. 90: translation by Hahn).

The Buddhist doctrine in fact had specific, medical/psychological ways of dealing with enamoured people as if they were intoxicated or sick patients who needed to be cured (even by a shock). According to their scientific method, using appropriate examples and practices, this 'intoxication' could be turned first into indifference towards the desired object, and later into a diffused *maitrī* ("loving kindness," "benevolence") towards every creature.<sup>29</sup>

What we 'know' about love in ancient and medieval India comes from these different types of written sources, as well as from the songs that have been preserved in some oral traditions. There were some culturally shared beliefs, such as the belief that women were much more passionate than men, or that love occurred in two main situations, one where the lovers were united, the other where for some reason they were separated.

Whereas the songs were often the product of popular circles, the written texts were usually concerned with the higher levels of society, where strict social conventions and family ties governed the rhythm of life. The behaviour of young people, in particular, was regulated by family and clan traditions. But even in those circumstances, some women and men would defy convention, and risk everything in the pursuit of 'real love.'

As for male sentimental education, in the three upper social layers, and especially among Brahmins, young men usually studied religious lore in the house of a teacher for several years, during which they had to serve their teacher's family and observe complete chastity (these activities were subsumed under the heading of *brahmacārya* "walking in the path of *brahman*"). At the completion of his studies the young man would return home, and marry the woman his parents had chosen for him. Marriage was a delicate affair, very important for establishing alliances between different clans. An arranged marriage was the usual, approved custom for the upper social groups, and it was actually understood and accepted that love might eventually come at a later stage, when the two spouses had learned

30. The custom was so entrenched that a traditional saying maintained that a daughter was ‘bred for another,’ meaning that she would soon become part of her husband’s family and clan. This consideration, together with ritual requirements for death rites to the ancestors, that had to be performed by the family males, as well as the need for strong arms to do either farm work or warfare, is supposed to be the main reason why Indian families favoured the birth of male children...

31. The ones alluded to are the *Veda* recensions for those who followed brahmanical lore and kept the rules of *brahmacārya*, portions of the Buddhist Canon for the Buddhists, and of the Jain Canon for the members of the Jain communities.

32. Translation by Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law* 105–06.

33. For this and other examples, see Kṣemendra, *The Narmamālā* 83 note 195; and Stein.

34. They usually only saw each other on the rare occasion of a marriage or a temple festival.

each other’s ways. The most prestigious type of nuptials, especially among Brahmins, was the one in which the father of the bride would confer on the bridegroom and his family the “gift of a virgin,” *kanyā-dāna*. So, to ensure that the daughter a family would give in marriage was truly a virgin, Indian parents of good standing used to arrange marriages between very young children; such brides and bridegrooms, however, would remain in their own houses up to puberty. The daughters, in particular, would be guarded very closely by their relatives.<sup>30</sup> Young men were supposed to be mainly devoted to studying the scriptures,<sup>31</sup> so they were equally unprepared for the strong emotions that love would induce. Instructions on how they should behave with the opposite sex were equally spread in the *Mahābhārata* and in the normative treatises. The *Mānavadharmasāstra*, for instance, prescribes the behaviour that a *brahmacārin*, the young student vowed to (temporary) chastity, should follow as regards his contacts with the dangerous tribe of women:

It is the very nature of women here to corrupt men. On that account, prudent men are never off guard in the presence of alluring young women. (2.213)

For an alluring young woman is capable of leading astray not only the ignorant but even learned men under the sway of anger or lust. (2.214)

He must not sit alone with his mother, sister or daughter; the array of sensory organs is powerful and overpowers even a learned man. (2.215)<sup>32</sup>

The last stanza may sound rather far fetched, but some later texts such as Kalhaṇa’s *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (“The River of Kings”), a historical work of the twelfth century, report examples of a similar extreme behaviour, here seen as a peculiar case of *nirvikalpavrata*, “the [śaiva] vow (or ‘practice’) of non-duality,” or “freedom from scruples.” This, in particular, is an attack on a Tantric guru called PramadaKaṇṭha, at *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* 7.278: “What more needs be said of this guru’s freedom from scruples than this, that transcending inhibitions he made love even with his own daughter?”<sup>33</sup>

Barring these aberrations, in such a closed type of society, where meetings between young males and young females were extremely rare,<sup>34</sup> and wives, at least in the north of India, were not supposed to learn any particular art or science, their counterpoint, and one of the

few outlets for exuberant young men of spirit, were prostitutes. With the exception of some learned female ascetics, and a few queens from southern India, the high profile courtesans were the sole cultivated women of their times. They certainly were very accomplished, the highlight of the literary, musical and dramatic meetings of the city's intellectuals. The most sought after were proficient in several arts and sciences, including writing poetry, painting, music, dance, drama, and could converse in several Indian languages. Some were temple servants, prostitutes and dancers, the *devadāsīs*, "slaves of God."<sup>35</sup>

Prostitutes were a special category of labourers, and in the first treatise of government, the *Arthaśāstra*, completed around the third century CE, the king is supposed to regulate their trade, through the "superintendent of courtesans."<sup>36</sup> At least in the fifteenth century, at the time of Baradācārya's *Vasantatilaka*, a monologue-play (*bhāṇa*), there appears a particular document, called *kalatrapattrikā*, "document of the [temporary] wife" (*Vasantatilaka*, v. 131), that also occurs twice in a Śaṅkara's *Śāradātilakabhāṇa*, composed between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries.<sup>37</sup> It is usually a document written in the presence of two witnesses, that sanctions a temporary liaison between a courtesan who has just reached puberty and one of the city's gallants. In exchange for the girl's exclusive favours, the gentleman undertakes to provide her with a number of golden coins, clothes, flower garlands, cosmetics and jewels for a set period, usually up to one year.<sup>38</sup> If the woman, during the stipulated time, should prove unfaithful to her temporary husband, she would have to act as his wife for life without any further payment.

Young men could actually face problems with their families and allowances when they fell prey to the courtesans' wiles, or believed that their show of mercenary love was a true proof of amorous engagement. There were also of course stories of courtesans who had truly fallen in love with their beaux,<sup>39</sup> but the majority attested to the contrary. Courtesans' establishments were run by their so-called 'mothers' who had to make sure that their charges would not fall in love. Examples are found in different genres of Sanskrit literature, such as the eighth-century satire *Kuṭṭanīmata* ("The Bawd's Counsel") of Damodaragupta or the much later comic monologue play *Śāradātilakabhāṇa* of a Śaṅkara where a madam tells a gallant:

35. See Marglin; Baldišsera, "Das sudindische Bharata Natyam;" Ramanujan, Rao, and Shulman; Meduri; Kersenboom; Vishwanathan; Fratagnoli.

36. See Kangle; *Arthaśāstra* 158–60.

37. See Baldišsera, *The Bhāṇa Śāradātilaka* 71, v. 81, and 153, v. 193. In the *Śāradātilakabhāṇa*, the first document (v. 81) is stipulated for a period of three months by the older sister of the pubescent prostitute who is the object of the transaction; the second one (v. 193), equally stipulated by an older prostitute for her younger sister, mentions a period of one month and has two gallants as witnesses.

38. In some Arabic countries this was a pre-Islamic custom, later accepted by Shiites and rejected by Sunnites. There the temporary wife was called *Nikah Mut'ah*, and in Iran, *Sigheh*. For a contemporary discussion of the practice in Iran, see Hawramy.

39. Like Vasantasenā in Bhāsa's *Cārudatta*, Haralatā in Damodaragupta's *Kuṭṭanīmata*, Madanasenā in Somadevabhaṭṭa's *Kathāsaritsāgara*, for instance.

Don't you know the courtesans' way of instructing their daughters? In the beginning the courtesans lure wealthy young men as if they were in love [with them], and, having completely deceived them with the enjoyment of love and various other pleasures, and having subdued their minds with the help of love potions, they rob them of everything, and, look! giving them a begging bowl, they immediately chase them away.<sup>40</sup>

40. Baldiṣsera, *The Bhāṇa Śāradātilaka*, v. 162 and preceding prose passage.

Mercenary love in fact often revealed that the delusion of the senses hid duplicity, trickery and eventual loss of dignity. Man, differently to the usual panegyrics that described him as a fascinating hero or a god on earth, became the object of betrayal and of pitiless satire.

Several Indian love stories, however, seemed to imply that even in circumstances where young people of the opposite gender could very seldom come into contact with each other, instances of the *coup de foudre* did occur. In stories of this kind, that entailed great courage, forbearance and resourcefulness from the lovers, the power of love was deemed supreme, and was seen to overcome both human and superhuman beings.

In such a state of affairs, passionate women who defied conventions could find themselves to have been seduced and abandoned, like in the case of Śakuntalā, and it was quite possible that a less-than-ingenious adulteress would be discovered, and ignominiously killed. A special figure was that of the *sakhī*, the female friend of the heroine, often used as a secret go-between. But whereas in south India, especially in the Caṅkam literature in Tamil, these female friends were always loyal,<sup>41</sup> in the northern stories they sometimes fell in love with the coveted young man (or divine figure), and betrayed the friend they were supposed to help.<sup>42</sup>

That desire could be seen in a negative light, in fact, is not only recounted in the writings of some religious people, but also in many secular love stories. Some of these might be seen as an exploration into the dark night of desire, where the redness of *rāga* ("passion," but also "the colour red") could easily turn into black *tamas* ("the darkness"), the obscurity and opaqueness of ignorance and delusion. Poetry, drama, music and the visual arts often portray the yearning for an elusive other, the lover of whom experiences anxiety,<sup>43</sup> absence, betrayal, abandonment and feeling of loss, if he/she is not altogether ridiculed.

41. See Ramanujan, *The Interior Landscape*; and Ramanujan, *Poems of Love*. See also Panattoni 468.

42. An entire section of Vidyākara's *Subhāṣitaratnakośa* is dedicated to these deceitful female friends.

43. This happens also in the love experience of women who fall in love with a male god, usually with Kṛṣṇa, or the Mallikāṛjuna form of Śiva. See for instance the already mentioned works of Ramanuja (*Speaking of Siva* and *Hymns for the Drowning*) and Hardy.

44. Like in the episode of the old prostitute of *Pādatāḍitaka*, who lost a tooth in the mouth of her lover in the course of a kiss (see Śyāmilaka, *The Pādatāḍitaka*; Śyāmilaka, “Pādatāḍitaka,” Baldișsera, “Pādatāḍitaka” 114).

45. Indian examples are found especially in *kathā* (“story”) literature.

46. See for instance Kṣemendra, *The Narmamālā* 3.64–67, where an old husband tries in vain to mount his young wife, or a similar instance at *Deśopadeśa* 7.18, quoted *ibidem*.

A love story is sometimes presented as a fight conducted in a battlefield, with bold advances and strategic retreats full of conflicting emotions, and often the sexual act itself is conceived in terms of a battle. This is seen as even more charming if the winner is the woman, but she must be an attractive young woman; old beauties are often ridiculed or just pitied,<sup>44</sup> when not altogether despised as in the Biblical story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar.<sup>45</sup> This, however, was a comparatively rare occurrence, as it is much more frequent to encounter stories of very young women married by their family to drooling old men. In satirical texts, at least, it is these men who are ridiculed,<sup>46</sup> while their wives are pitied, unless they manage to successfully betray their despicable husbands.

The standard image of Kāma as the god of love, called by innumerable epithets that show his absolute sway over everyone’s minds, is that of a very handsome youth armed with a sugarcane bow and with five arrows made of flowers, that never fail to hit their target. In the epics one of Kāma’s arrows wounds even the great god Śiva, the staunch ascetic, who in return burns Kāma to ashes with the flame from his third eye, but cannot avoid falling prey to desire, and ultimately ends up married. Kāma on the other hand, though disembodied, becomes even more powerful, as he can now insinuate himself undetected in anyone’s mind.

Indian literature usually showed the devious workings of Kāma in the binary way of presenting the evolution of a love story. The terms in which this is couched come from dramatic practice, which then passed into other types of literature. Thus love is usually seen either as “love enjoyed in the union [of the lovers]” (*sambhogaśṛṅgāra*), when the two lovers are seen together, and are usually locked in a fond embrace, or as “love [suffered] in separation” (*vipralambhaśṛṅgāra* or *virāhaśṛṅgāra*). The latter occurs in a plurality of ways; it can happen either when the lovers have not yet been introduced to each other, but each (or one of them) longs for the other person because they have fallen in love on seeing her/him from afar, or on hearing their praise or their description by somebody, or on seeing their painted or sculpted likeness. It could also occur because, after a period of their being together, they had to separate, however briefly; or, a still sadder occurrence, in the case of unrequited love. The first instance, that of the union of the lovers, is more frequently seen in the masterpieces of the visual arts, but is usually deemed uninteresting or inappropriate in writings, where often it verges on ridicule. Unhappy love, on the other hand, is a favourite theme of fiction.



47. *bhāva* comes from the root *bhū* (“to become,” “to be”), as explained in one of the oldest Indian philosophical schools or “opinions,” Sāṃkhya.

A detailed phenomenology of love is best found in texts on dramatic theory and on poetics. The former show the best manner in which to represent amorous feelings on stage, the latter explain how to do so in poetic language, and though they use for artistic effect very conventional images, both obviously derive their material from actual love experiences. Their psychological approach to different love situations, in fact, is often remarkably ingenious, as Indian drama and fiction had a particular manner of representing *bhāvas* (“[stable] emotions”).<sup>47</sup> According to some scholars, the oldest dramatic treatise, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (“Treatise on acting”), attributed to the mythical sage Bharata, which has now been dated between the first century BCE and the second CE, is not too distant in time from a lost philosophical work, the *Śaṣṭitantra* attributed to Vārṣaganya. This is the text on which might have been based the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (“Explanation on Sāṃkhya”) of Īśvarakṛṣṇa, that dates from the fourth or fifth century CE and explains the term *bhāva* as “disposition.” Sāṃkhya philosophy counts eight *bhāvas* intended as “[fundamental] dispositions” of the human mind, different from the *bhāvas* of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, that considers them as “[stable] emotions” (see Torella, *Il pensiero dell’India*). The *Sāṃkhyakārikā* divides its *bhāvas* into two groups of four opposites: moral virtue, knowledge, detachment, suzerainty, and their opposite, i.e. immorality, absence of knowledge, attachment, dependence. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* presents in a list its own sequence of eight *bhāvas*, called *sthayībhāvas*, the “basic,” or rather “stable emotions,” each giving rise to its own particular aesthetic rapture, *rasa*:

1. Love, *rati*; its *rasa* is *śṛṅgāra*, the amorous, sensitive
2. Humour, *hāsa*; its *rasa* is *hāsyā*, the comic
3. Grief, *śoka*; its *rasa* is *karuṇa*, the compassionate
4. Anger, *krodha*; its *rasa* is *raudra*, the furious
5. Surge of energy, *utsāha*; its *rasa* is *vīra*, the heroic
6. Fear, *bhaya*; its *rasa* is *bhayānaka*, the apprehensive
7. Disgust, *jugupsā*; its *rasa* is *bībhatsa*, the horrific, repulsive
8. Astonishment, *vismaya*; its *rasa* is *adbhūta*, the marvellous

A ninth *bhāva*, added at a later stage, is *śānti*, tranquillity; its *rasa* is *śānta*, the quietened, appeased.<sup>48</sup>

These, from initially being spontaneous reactions to certain situations, expressed through involuntary physical manifestations, like

48. It is the *bhāva* appropriate to the ascetics and the contemplative life, and is found as the main emotion in several Buddhist plays.

49. Similar to what happens to Hero in the Greek poem of Mouseon (Musaïos) *Hero and Leander*, at v. 162, when, hit by a *coup de foudre* at the sight of handsome Leander, she is unable to control her confusion, and cannot speak, but draws circles in the sand with her toe, and keeps needlessly adjusting her veil.

50. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* employs a culinary simile that plays also on the two principal meanings of the term *rasa*, “juice,” and “taste.”

pallor, sudden redness, trembling, sweating, uncontrolled movements...,<sup>49</sup> were then all systematically listed first in the dramatic manuals, and later in the *alaṅkāraśāstras* (“treatises on poetics”), in order to create the occurrence of a particular *rasa* (an “aesthetic experience,” literally “a taste,” “a savouring”) capable of giving pleasure akin to relish<sup>50</sup> to the minds of the listeners, or spectators.

In dramas actors train in order to portray emotions through their *sattvikābhinaya* (“interiorised,” “suggestive acting”), and in non dramatic literary forms there is a similar effort towards the portrayal of emotions through the mere suggestion of them. Instead of stating, for instance, that a particular woman was sad because her lover or husband was absent, or late for the tryst, the writer would describe her unpremeditated actions, glances and movements, that would translate, for the reader or listener, as symptoms of her longing. Dramatic texts are a consistent part of Kāvya, the refined artistic literature of ancient India, showing, through conventionally accepted, shared *topoi*, its peculiar taste for the implicit, suggested meaning of poetic connotation. Kāvya, like drama, takes its themes from actual situations, but, again like drama, has a ‘conventional’ manner of representing love, whatever its circumstances. These conventions were part of a shared knowledge or cultural milieu between writers, actors and a learned public, but at the same time were also not very distant from real-life occurrences and gestures, so that most people could easily recognise them as part of their own experience.

In the Indian poetical fancy, Kāma’s arrows bring on love’s fever, a serious disease which knows ten stages of gravity and can even prove fatal. People tried to counteract it with the same traditional items used to lower body temperature in extreme heat or sickness, but usually in the case of love fever these customary remedies would not work, or would actually be harmful. The rays of the moon, for instance, used to cool a feverish patient, would seem to scorch a body ravaged by the fever of love.

Even in myth, the power of love was stronger than the waters of peace and appeasement.

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